



Upland bird season is really bird dog season in Colorado by Scott Willoughby
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STRASBURG - The calendar might lead sportsmen to believe it's upland bird season in Colorado. But the more accurate truth may be that it's bird dog season.

Ask almost any sampling of shot gunners walking the high plains in search of pheasants or quail this week and many - if not most - will tell you they're in it for the dogs. Same goes for those lab-crazy water fowlers.

Every hunter enjoys working over a well-trained dog. There's nothing quite like watching a German short-haired pointer quartering at full tilt, a springer spaniel bounding through thick cover or a Vizsla locked up on the scent of a game bird holding tight. For the proud dog owner, the satisfaction of seeing his pet perform can supersede all other elements of a hunt.

Problem is, not all dogs fit into that "well-trained" category. When it comes to the typical weekend wing shooter, in fact, most probably don't.

A truly "finished" dog is as much a joy to hunt over as it is a rarity among recreational hunting types. And even a dog that is steady to wing, shot and fall demands regular tune-ups to stay sharp.

"Even when you do all the work and practice, it still doesn't always go right," said Bob Porter, who trains gun dogs out of his Strasburg Game Birds hunting preserve (303-622-4608). "I don't care who you are. It doesn't always go right."

Just the same, it's widely agreed that the best advice one can offer a dog less bird hunter is, quite simply, get a dog. Once that threshold is crossed a hunter can consider the various degrees of training.

"I always ask people, what do you want out of your dog?" said C.J. Kausel, president of the recently established Rocky Mountain Sporting Dog Club (www.RMTSDC.com). "Not everybody wants a pointing dog that's completely finished, steady to wing, shot and fall, that you would have to have in a hunt test or field trial situation. Most people are happy to have a dog that goes out and points a bird and when the bird gets up, the dog takes off, they shoot the bird and the dog brings it back to them. It doesn't have to deliver it to their hand and if it drops it at their feet they're happier than heck."

Even achieving that level of proficiency can pose a problem for time-challenged dog owners, however. And now that the state's most popular upland season is already underway, it's easy to succumb to the mistaken belief that attempts to train your dog at this point in the pheasant season is case of too little too late. Experts say that any time a dog spends in a hunting environment is time well spent.

"The more time the dog spends working with live birds, the better off she'll be," said Porter. "Particularly for a young, inexperienced dog, it takes them a little while just to figure out or remember what you want them to do."

The good news for unfinished dog owners is that late season can offer the best environment for hunting dogs, as scenting conditions improve over the hotter, drier days of autumn. It's said that pheasants in particular frustrate pointing dog owners more than they do pointing dogs, since the wily birds are prone to sneaking out from under the noses of dogs trained to freeze in their tracks once they get a good whiff.

"Pointing dogs really weren't designed to hunt pheasants," Porter said. "They're designed to hunt grouse and quail - covey-type birds that hold better. A pheasant is a really tough bird to hunt behind pointing dogs."

"Normally when you get that super great day where your dog pointed them all is after a snow, or its super windy and they're all stuffed into one little belt of cover or something. Otherwise, a lot of guys run the flushing dogs on them. Their purpose is to go out, catch scent and get in there and root that bird up as opposed to it running off when the dog is on point."

For that reason, it could be argued that even a poorly trained pointer can serve as an asset in the field, provided it's willing to work within gun range. But working with a trainer or a group of like-minded club members for a few field sessions is likely to reap more reward. The Rocky Mountain Sporting Dog Club has 400 acres in Strasburg set aside for the specific purpose of offering pointers, flushers and even mixed-breed sporting dogs a place to run and train with their owners.

"We want people to come out with their kids, with their spouses, have fun in the field with their dog and enjoy themselves," Kausel said during a recent Rocky Mountain Sporting Dog Club open house. "We don't want people to be intimidated. This is for fun."